

Leonid Panteleev



WORD OF HONOUR





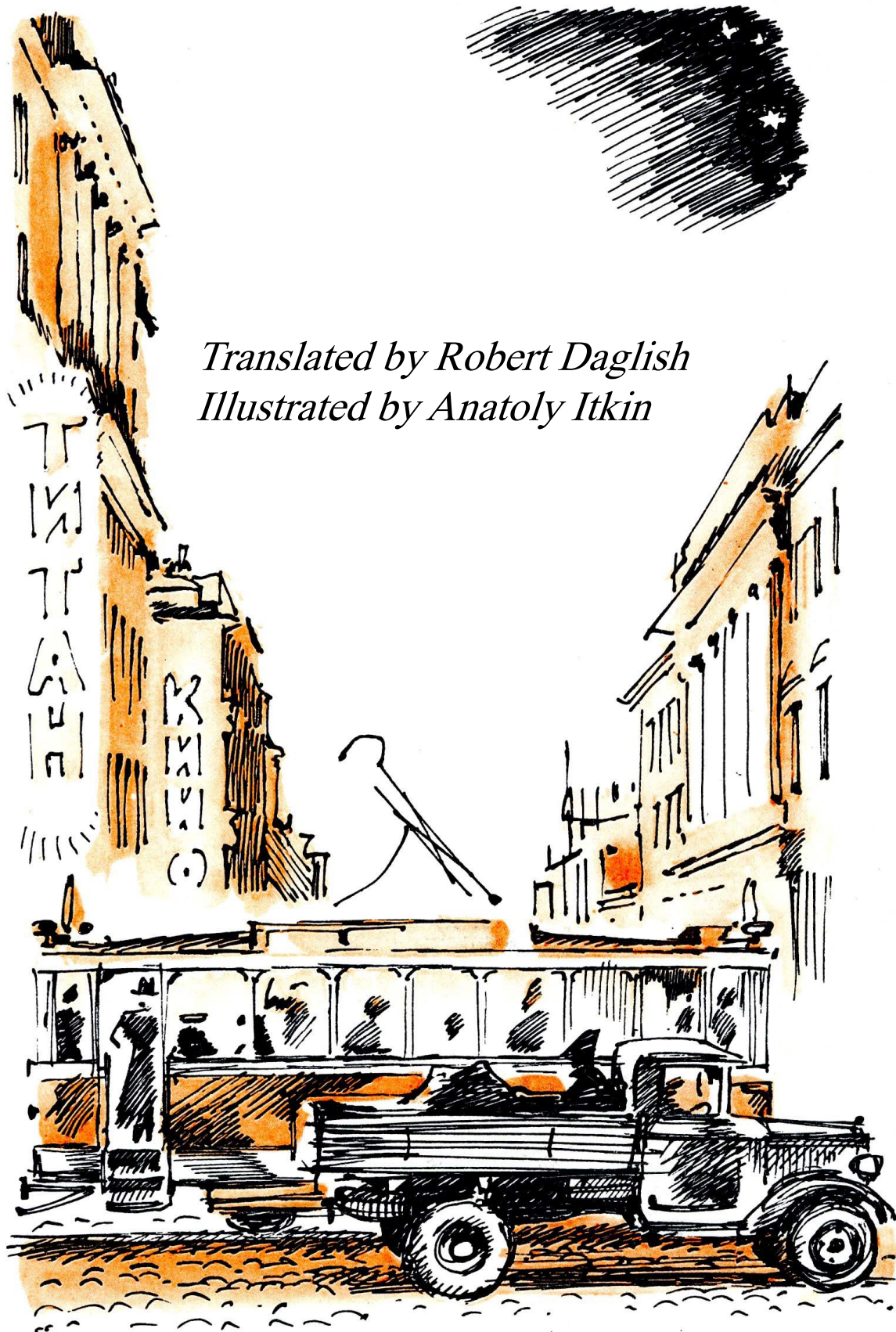
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Story



Translated by Robert Daglish
Illustrated by Anatoly Itkin





WORD OF HONOUR

It's such a pity I don't know the little boy's name, or where he lives, or who his father and mother are. It was so dark I couldn't even make out his face properly. I only remember he had freckles on his nose, and that he had short trousers, which were held up not by a belt, but with those little braces that go over the shoulders and button somewhere in front.

One day in the summer I happened to go into a little park on Vasilyevsky Island, near the White Church. I had an interesting book with me and I became so engrossed in it that I didn't notice the evening coming on. When it finally got too dark to read, I closed the book with a snap, stood up and walked towards the gate.

The park was empty, lights could be seen twinkling in the streets, and the keeper was ringing his bell somewhere behind the trees.

I was afraid the gate would be closed and hastened my steps.

Suddenly I stopped. It seemed to me I had heard someone crying behind the bushes.

I turned down a side path towards a little hut showing white in the darkness, the kind they have in most city parks to keep gardening tools in. Outside it a little boy about seven years old was standing with his head lowered, sobbing loudly.

"What's the matter, old chap?" I called to him.

He looked up at me and said: "Nothing."

"Nothing? Has somebody hurt you? "

"No. "

"Then why are you crying?"

It was still hard for him to speak, he had not yet swallowed all his tears and he kept hiccuping and sniffing between his sobs.

"Come along," I said. "Look how late it is, the park will be closed in a minute. "

I tried to take his hand, but he jerked it away sharply.



“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t go away from here.”

“You can’t go away from here? Why not? What’s the matter with you?” “Nothing,” he said.

“Aren’t you well?”

“No, I’m all right.”

“Then why can’t you go?”

“I’m a sentry,” he said.

“A sentry?!”

“Can’t you see? It’s a game.”

“But who are you playing with?”

The boy did not answer for a moment, then sighed and said:

“I don’t know.” Well, I must say that made me think there must be something not quite right with the boy’s head.

“Look here,” I said. “What do you mean? You say you’re playing, and yet you don’t know who you’re playing with?”

“No, I don’t,” he said. “I was sitting in the park, and some big boys came up to me and said, ‘Do you want to play soldiers?’ So I said I did. And we started playing. ‘You’re a sergeant,’ they said. And one big boy, he was a marshal, he brought me here and said, ‘This is our ammunition dump. You’re going to be a sentry. Stand on guard here till I come and relieve you.’ So I said I would and he said, ‘Give me your word of honour you won’t go away.’”

“Then what?”

“So I said, ‘I give my word of honour I won’t go away.’ And what happened after that?”

“So I’m still standing here, and they won’t come back.”

“I see,” I said, smiling. “Is it long since you were put on guard?”

“Before it got dark.”

“But where are they?”

The boy sighed again and said: “I think they’ve gone away.”

“Gone away?”

“They’ve forgotten.”

“Then why are you standing here?”

“I gave my word of honour. . .”

I was about to laugh, but it suddenly occurred to me that there was nothing to laugh at and the boy was absolutely right. If he had given his word, he had to stick it out no matter what happened, game or no game.

“Well, you’re in a fix, aren’t you?” I said. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” said the boy, and began to cry again.

I very much wanted to help him. But what could I do?

Go and look for the silly fellows who had put him on guard, made him give his word of honour, then gone off home themselves? How could I find them now anyway? They had probably had their supper and gone to bed, and by now were far away in the land of dreams.

But their sentry was still on guard. In the dark. And hungry too, probably. “I expect you’re pretty hungry,” I said.

“Yes, I am,” he replied.

“Well, listen to me,” I said after thinking a moment.

“You run off home and have your supper while I keep guard for you here. ”

“Will you?” said the boy, “Will that be all right?”

“Why not?”

“You aren’t a soldier.”

I scratched my head and said: “No, I’m not. It won’t work. I can’t even relieve you. Only a soldier can do that, only your C.O.”

And suddenly I had an idea. If it was only a soldier who could free the boy of his promise and take him off guard duty, then what was I waiting for? I must go and find a soldier.

I told the boy to wait a minute and ran off to the park entrance.

The gate was not yet closed and the keeper was still tinkling his bell somewhere in the depths of the park.

I stood at the gate waiting for some military man to come along. But as luck would have it, there were no soldiers about.

I caught a glimpse of black greatcoats on the other side of the street. Good. They must be sailors. But when I crossed over, I found they were only trade school boys. A tall railway man went past in a fine greatcoat with bright purple collar tabs. But even he and his splendid coat were no use to me at the moment.

I was about to go back empty-handed to the park, when at the tram stop on the corner, I caught sight of an army officer’s uniform and a cap with a blue cavalry band. I don’t think I have ever been so pleased in my life as I was at that moment.



I rushed to the tram stop. But before I could get there I saw a tram approaching and the officer, a young cavalry major, moving forward with the crowd to get inside.

I dashed up to him panting and grabbed his arm.

“Comrade Major,” I shouted. “Wait a minute!

Comrade Major! ...”

He looked round at me in surprise : “What’s going on?”

“You see... You see, there’s a boy here, by the hut in the park, he’s on sentry duty. He can’t go away, he gave his word of honour... He’s crying... ” By now he had missed his tram and he looked at me in great annoyance.

But when I explained in more detail what it was all about, he agreed at once. “Yes, of course. Why didn’t you say so before?”

When we reached the park, the keeper was locking the gate. I asked him to wait a few minutes, saying there was a boy left behind in the park, and the major and I hurried down the path.

We could hardly find the little white hut in the dark.

The boy was still standing where I had left him, and crying again, but very quietly. I called to him. He was so glad he even shouted for joy.

“Well, here we are,” I said. “I’ve brought your C.O.”

At the sight of the officer the boy stiffened to attention and became several inches taller.



“Comrade Sentry,” said the major. “What’s your rank?”

“I’m a sergeant,” said the boy.

“Comrade Sergeant, I order you to dismiss from your post.”

The boy was silent, then sniffed and said: “But what rank are you? I can’t see your stars...”

“I’m a major.”

Then the boy put his hand to the broad peak of his old grey cap and said. “Very good, Comrade Major, I dismiss.”

And he said it in such a ringing voice and so smartly that we both burst out laughing.

And the boy, too, laughed happily and with relief.

As soon as we were outside the park the gate slammed behind us and the keeper turned the key several times in the lock.

The major held out his hand to the boy.

“Good for you, Comrade Sergeant!” he said. “You’ll make a real soldier. Good-bye!”

The boy mumbled something and also said good-bye.

Then the major saluted us both and, seeing that another tram was coming, ran to the stop.

I, too, said good-bye to the boy and shook hands.

“Perhaps I ought to take you home?” I said.

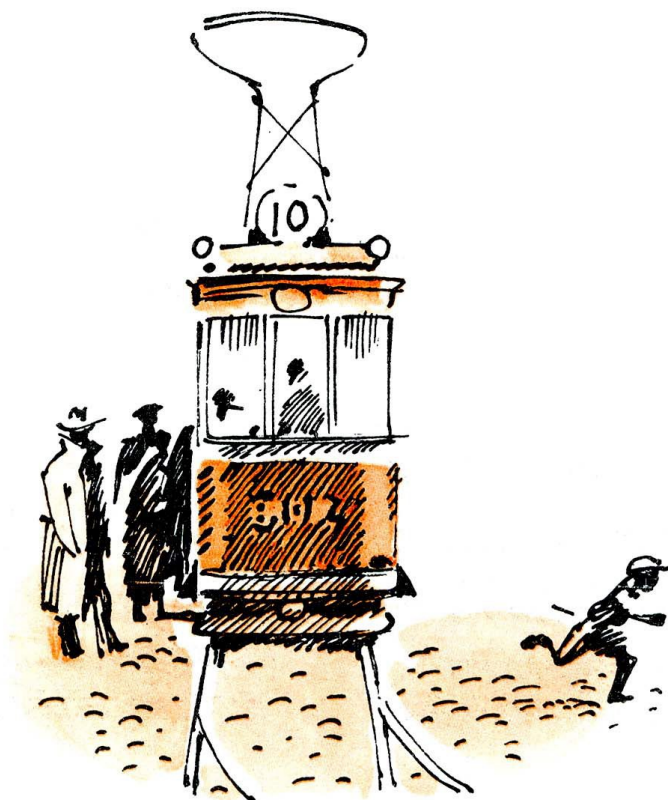
“No, it’s not far. I’m not afraid,” he said.

I looked at his little freckled nose and realized that he really was not afraid. A boy with a will like that, and so good at keeping his word, would not be afraid of the dark, not afraid of roughs, not afraid of other, worse things.



And when he grew up? It was too early to say what he would be when he grew up, but whatever it was, he would certainly be a real man.

The thought made me feel glad I had met him. I squeezed his hand again with a feeling of real pleasure.





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*As a child, I lost my family, was left alone and
was a street child for several years. I was placed in
orphanages, ran away from there and wandered again.
During these years, I changed many professions - I was a
shepherd, a shoemaker, a newspaper seller, a worker at a
lemonade factory, and a cook in a restaurant.
I was eighteen years old when my first book, "The Republic
of SHKID", came out. Since then, I have been writing books.
I write for both adults and children.
The dearest reader for me is the one who has just learned to
read.
Now you have read these words, and we have become
acquaintances. You are somewhere very far away from me,
but it seems to me that I hear your breathing,
I even see your finger on these printed lines.
I shake your hand firmly, dear reader friend!*

L. Panteleev